

# A Conversation with the Governor

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PHOTOGRAPH BY MICHAEL GILBERT

Sanguine and self-possessed, Hawaii's new governor stepped back from the lectern. In the gallery, viewers rose to their feet in enthusiastic applause. Below, seated members of the state legislature clapped with polite, if resolute, acceptance.

The president of the senate, The Honorable Bobby Bunda, stepped to the mike. "You have witnessed history being made today," he told us. "Linda Lingle is the first woman [governor] to address the Hawai'i State Legislature."

Bunda's remarks reflected only the tip of the iceberg that cooled the chamber floor. Linda Lingle is not only the first woman elected governor in the state of Hawai'i, but the first Republican to hold that seat in 40 years. As *The Maui News* noted, Lingle "is the first governor elected to office from outside the established political power structure."

That structure was put in place in 1954, when John Burns, a former Honolulu police officer and civil defense administrator, orchestrated the Democratic takeover of the Territorial legislature. In 1959 Burns helped shepherd Hawai'i to statehood; that same year, Republican William Quinn, who had been Presidentially appointed Territorial Governor in 1957, became the 50th state's first elected governor. Three years later, Burns ousted Quinn to become the Democratic governor of Hawai'i. For the next 40 years, Hawai'i would be considered a one-party state.

On January 21, 2003, Governor Lingle delivered her state of the state address to an audience composed of optimistic supporters seeking reform and relief from the status quo; balanced by an equivocal legislature, cautiously approaching a turn toward the road less traveled, the first derailment of Hawaii's political machine since 1962.

Lingle is no newcomer to firsts. She was the first woman elected mayor of Maui County, the first Maui mayor not born on Maui, and at that time the youngest mayor ever elected. She was also the first Jewish person that many Maui residents had ever met.

Born in Missouri, Lingle arrived on O'ahu in 1975,

and worked as editor of the Teamsters' and Hotel Workers' newsletter. The next year she relocated to Moloka'i, where she founded and ran the *Moloka'i Free Press*.

In 1980 Lingle ran for county council. "No one in my family had been in politics, but I felt that the people of Moloka'i weren't being well represented. When you are young, you want to make a difference. So I tried."

She not only tried, she stunned county pundits by beating the incumbent, an official of the then-powerful International Longshoremen and Warehousemen's Union (ILWU), for the Moloka'i seat on the Maui County Council. She served on the council for the next decade, and in 1990, the unlikely young woman from Moloka'i was elected Maui's mayor. Four years later, she won that office again.

At the end of her mayoral term in 1998, confident and ambitious, Lingle launched a run for governor against incumbent Ben Cayetano. "I've been in office for 17 years," she told me in 1997. "I have never lost an election." She did lose—barely—by 1 percent, a mere 5,000 votes. Lingle decided to regroup. She moved to Honolulu and personally took on the task of breathing new life into what most considered a losing proposition: the Republican Party of Hawai'i.

"She can't possibly win," said one savvy politico. "This is a Democratic state. She'll never get the sup-

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port.” In her State of the State address, Lingle responded, “The people of Hawai‘i have spoken loudly and clearly . . . the status quo is no longer acceptable. They want a new beginning and that is exactly what we must give them.”

Throughout her political career, Lingle has remained a challenge for politics-as-usual. Pro-business, she advocates less government and more individual responsibility. She supports projects that provide jobs, yet has defied organized labor unions by strongly supporting privatization of government services. She is adamant in her desire to downsize government, yet remains a champion for organizations that help the elderly, disabled, and persons with mental illness. She has become a strong voice for the Hawaiian community and has made a personal commitment to work on the federal level for recognition of Native Hawaiians as Native Americans. “I’m a bleeding-heart conservative,” she has quipped.

She has also inherited a state bleeding a deficit of \$250 million.

*Maui No Ka Oi* spoke with Linda Lingle about her vision for Hawai‘i, and how she will use her seat as governor to help Maui.

**MNKO:** You’ve talked about making many changes. Now that you are governor, and have your hands a little bit around the job, how much more difficult than expected will it be to make those changes?

**LL:** (laughs) Emphasis on the “little!” Actually, it’s better than I expected. I’ve had a great reception from the legislators of both parties. They are focused on the issues I felt would be most important—restoring trust in government, improving our schools and expanding our economy. Of course, these issues are pretty obvious, so it’s not surprising that the legislators see it the same way.

Also, I’m pleasantly surprised by the caliber of people I was able to attract to the cabinet. The job pays substantially less than what most of them made in the private sector, and most people don’t want to be

exposed to the public in this way. It’s giving up a private life to answer for everything you do.

I interviewed a young lawyer yesterday who’s bright, articulate, working in a private firm, and doing well. I asked him, “Why would you leave to come here?” He said, “It’s so exciting; I want to be in on the ground floor.” His response tells me that younger people are viewing this administration and thinking, “There is a place for me. It doesn’t matter that I didn’t campaign for her, or go to school with her. There is a chance for me.” That’s what we want to achieve. We want merit to matter.

**MNKO:** There’s been a lot of local support for giving the counties more autonomy. Currently, however, they have only one revenue stream, property tax. How can the counties run themselves without the authority to tax?

**LL:** There’s a bill in the legislature to give the counties the power to tax, and I’m all for it. Give ‘em all the power they want—I’m for home rule. [Though] it’s one of those “be careful what you wish for” situations. . . . I say give the counties that authority and let them make the decision: Are we going to raise excise taxes? Other taxes? If we say the counties are going to be responsible for this particular service, then the funding has to go along with it.

We’re setting up a committee between the state and the county governments to discuss which services should go back to the counties. [At] the next legislative session, we’ll present those responsibilities and powers that we feel need to be given back to the counties.

**MNKO:** Wouldn’t such changes create a dramatic dismantling of the present structure?

**LL:** Well, you know the structure of government was devised over 40 years ago, and the world has changed in 40 years. There’s not a business or a nonprofit organization, or a family for that matter, that operates the way it did 40 years ago. The governments on the neighbor islands are a lot more professional and sophisticated than they were 40 years ago. So, yes, I hope it will change the structure, and it should.

**MNKO:** One of your primary educational goals is to decentralize the state system. You’ve proposed creating seven autonomous school boards, and allocating DOE services and funds for all children, not just those attending public school. Do you think that will also relieve the problems associated with the Felix vs. Waihee consent decree, and the tremendous need in our schools for better special education?

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**LL:** This is the only state with a state consent decree, because no other state has a statewide school system. So a specific incident in a specific school in a specific district (which should have been handled on the local level) was instead blown into a statewide consent decree. Hundreds of millions of dollars have been wasted, trying to comply with a court order that resulted from a turf battle between the Department of Health and the Department of Education. The whole special-education issue can be dealt with much better at the local level, so it fits with my strong feelings about having local school boards.

Governors across the country are focused on this issue for another reason. The federal government has mandated special education, without appropriating funding to carry out the mandate. This is a major issue.

**MNKO:** You've also said that you want to change the trend of our children leaving the state. With that goal in mind, are you going to work toward a four-year university on Maui?

**LL:** The current financial situation [makes it] unrealistic to expect that kind of project at this time. The state is facing a serious financial situation brought about by years of spending without any relative increase in revenue. Each year as legislators tried to balance the budget, they kept using one-time revenues to pay for ongoing expenses. For instance, when it came time to pay the bargaining increases for professors, teachers and other employees, they tapped funds that weren't recurring—and that's why, eventually, they had to raid the state retirement system. We're not going to do that. Nor are we going to take money out of the Hurricane Relief Fund.

The capital-improvement budget the previous governor sent down on December 16 called for \$1.12 billion in new debt for buildings; we've cut that to \$550 million dollars—just over half. That alone saves us maybe \$25 million a year in debt service over the life of 20-year bonds.

**MNKO:** Then a four-year college on Maui is a no.

**LL:** Our goal is to restore fiscal discipline. I think the university will need to focus on expanding its programs before expanding buildings. The state has simply spent all the money it had.

**MNKO:** Another issue for Maui is the future of agriculture. As you know, nearly all the sugar plantations have closed; Maui has the last working mill. The pineapple industry is also having difficulties competing in the world market. A way of life is passing. If we lose agriculture, we lose those beautiful green valleys and hillsides, and risk losing much of what attracts visitors, who comprise an economy even larger than

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agriculture. How can you help Maui resolve these problems as governor?

**LL:** This is a statewide issue every county is dealing with, for all the reasons you mentioned. The first thing I changed was the philosophy of the Department of Agriculture—which had seen itself as an enforcer and regulator—to be an advocate for agriculture. [Before] I chose a director for the department, I assembled a search committee of leaders from the agricultural community across the state, including Maui people, [and] chose from their short list. Our ag director is focused on expanding the markets for agriculture products, as well as helping with long-standing issues such as water, infrastructure, shipping, and marketing.

Agriculture is also an important part of the technology sector—and one of the more controversial. I see Hawai'i having partnerships through the East-West Center, the United Nations, helping to feed countries that, because of drought, pests and disease, just can't produce the food they need. Hawaii's year-round growing season [gives us] the ability to develop hybrid seeds and plants that will enable these countries to feed themselves. This is an important industry, and an important role for our state.

**MNKO:** Will you seek support for more programs and education in rural agriculture, as well as bio-development?

**LL:** I recently met with Jim Moseley, the deputy secretary of the U.S. Department of Agriculture from Washington, D.C., who was here visiting. We see a number of areas where the federal government may be able to help, either with low-interest loans to individual farmers or co-op organizations, or grants to people engaged in agriculture. I was impressed, because Secretary Moseley is a farmer who built a little family farm into a big business. He understands farming from a farmer's point of view. That he took so much time to tour the state, to look at our projects, is very encouraging. He is especially focused on



rural development. I feel that we can bring a lot more money into our state with agriculture. Our ability to carry out new programs and projects [depends on] partnerships with the private sector, and money from the federal government.

**MNKO:** You also talked about improving the business environment. How is your administration effecting change for small business?

**LL:** I've selected people who have good business backgrounds to head departments that have an impact on business. For example, labor people normally head the Department of Labor & Industrial Relations. My department head is an attorney who has helped small- and medium-size businesses

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deal with labor issues; he comes at it from a business point of view, which is a first. Our director of Commerce & Consumer Affairs, within his first month, refunded \$1 million that will go back to businesses, because we felt they were being overcharged in licensing fees for the securities industry. Fees should match what it takes to run the department, not allow multimillion-dollar

funds to build up, when the business community could really use that money.

**MNKO:** Fair treatment is a constant theme in your approach to government. You've stated, "Hawaiians don't feel they are being treated fairly, because they're not." While mayor of Maui, you eliminated property tax on Hawaiian homestead land, and as governor, one of your first acts was to ask for the legislature's support in the immediate payment of an undisputed \$12 million owed to Hawaiians in ceded lands. On the federal level, you're committed to the cause of attaining Native American status for Native Hawaiians.

Is your Jewish heritage a factor in your empathy for Hawaiian issues?

**LL:** I don't think there's any question. It's never been asked of me like that before, but people who are aware of Jewish history, of Israel's history, would understand that land is a very important concept, and it's not *any* land. Prior to the Holocaust, there was a move to give the Jewish people a large amount of land in Africa. Tempting as it might have been, it

wasn't about any land—it was about particular land. And the Hawaiian people feel that [way] about Hawai'i: it's about *this* land, it's about the spirit that's here in this land. So yes, I think it does make it easier for me to empathize with the Hawaiian community.

**MNKO:** And to take it to the federal level, to go after the status of Native Americans. . . .

**LL:** The third week of February I'll testify before Congress on this bill. I won't testify in a legal sense; there are people who can discuss the pros and cons of legality. And I won't discuss it in a cultural sense, because Hawaiians with me will be able to discuss that. I will discuss it from the view of a governor who is leading a state that can never be whole if this issue is not resolved. It's about America doing what's right. And that means recognizing Native Hawaiians as a specific people—the people who were here when Americans, acting on America's behalf, overthrew the Hawaiian government.

**MNKO:** How do you think that will change the environment in Hawai'i?

**LL:** It would take a lot of pressure off the Hawaiian community, because right now the Hawaiian Homestead program is threatened by lawsuits. The federal funding they get for Native Hawaiian education, Native Hawaiian health matters, is all in jeopardy. I think it would be a relief to everybody. Then [we] could focus on helping the Hawaiian people. Right now [in the Hawaiian community] it's: "Hold on to what you have; don't let them take what's already been given to us."

**MNKO:** What would you like to say to the people of Maui?

**LL:** That it's been gratifying to bring so many Maui people into state government. They have a lot to offer, as you know. The head of our department of human services, Lillian Koller, is well known for creating the Maui Drug Corps. Georgina Kawamura, our state budget director, was the Maui County budget director. Just last week, I named J. P. Schmidt as the new insurance commissioner for the state of Hawai'i. J.P. was Maui Corporation Counsel. Our director of labor is Nelson Befitel, who was a deputy corporation counsel on Maui, and who was born and raised on Moloka'i.

I'd also say it's important for the people of Maui to know that their issues are understood at the state level. The lessons I'm able to apply on budgeting, on community participation, on building successful partnerships, are lessons I learned as mayor of Maui County. They are going to help me immensely as governor. 